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RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC  
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RUZEJAA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 000473

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2018

TAGS: PGOV NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIAN RULING PARTY (S)ELECTS NEW LEADERSHIP

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b & d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) selected new leadership at its March 8 convention. Contrary to expectations -- that the convention would be a showdown between supporters and opponents of former president Obasanjo over their respective candidates, former Ebonyi Governor Sam Egwu and former Senate President Pius Anyim -- a compromise emerged. In the name of "party unity", the 27 PDP state Governors met in advance and endorsed a consensus slate of candidates, topped by Prince Vincent Ogbulafor -- a former Cabinet Minister and party National Secretary -- as the new National Chairman. Since Ogbulafor was deemed acceptable to both sides, he was approved by President Yar'Adua. Yar'Adua did not publicly endorse Ogbulafor but his consent to the choice was conveyed by the governors. The affirmation of Ogbulafor as Chairman marked a shift in the center of power within the PDP, away from the Obasanjo camp and toward a coalition of governors and individuals, some of whom had previously identified with the self-styled "reformers" of the G-21 and Integrity Group. However, the process of the convention was PDP business as usual and not a triumph for "reformers" as the new leadership was selected in advance rather than elected by the delegates. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Prince Vincent Ogbulafor's name first surfaced as a compromise candidate March 6, only two days before the convention, at a meeting in Abuja hosted by Kwara State Governor (and Governor's Forum Chair) Bukola Saraki. According to press reports, once the governors had settled on a consensus candidate, Saraki (along with Governors Amaechi of Rivers State and Uduaghan of Delta State) met with Yar'Adua and persuaded him to accept Ogbulafor, reportedly because the President had previously said he wanted a conciliator who could preserve party unity. Though Ogbulafor had served as both a Cabinet Minister and the longest serving National Secretary of the PDP under Obasanjo, he later fell out with the former President over the third term issue, and was sacked as Secretary in 2005. Ogbulafor was thus thought to be largely free of Obasanjo's influence.

¶3. (SBU) Despite Obasanjo's reported last minute maneuverings in support of his preferred candidate, Egwu, Ogbulafor prevailed as the governors' consensus candidate; he and the rest of the consensus slate were presented to delegates at the convention. It was announced to the party faithful at the Conference that all other candidates had withdrawn,

though notably Anyim and Egwu remained silent on the dais, and did not publicly renounce their candidacies. Not all delegates were pleased at the fact that, once again, there had been no election. On March 9, at a dinner honoring both the incoming and outgoing PDP leadership, Yar'Adua issued a call for inclusiveness, reconciliation and consolidation. He further maintained that "we must build an effective bulwark against backsliding from the level of integrity of political competition and participation which we have attained, into an era of internal strife, primordial loyalties and self-defeatist tendencies."

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The affirmation of Vincent Ogbulafor as PDP National Chairman may be interpreted as a move by President Yar'Adua and the current governors to loosen the overbearing influence of ex-President Obasanjo. It also marks the emergence of new power brokers in the party, led by Governor Saraki, and including Governors Amaechi, Uduaghan, Gabriel Suswam of Benue, Danjuma Goje of Gombe, Sullivan Chime of Enugu, Gbenga Daniel of Ogun and Namadi Sambo of Kaduna State who were members of the committee set up to search for a consensus slate. Also demonstrating influence were Senate President David Mark, Speaker of the House Bankole, and Farouk Lawan, leader of the Integrity Group in the House. Though "the reformers" (so-called) are represented in this group, namely by Bankole and Lawan, and are happy to see Obasanjo's influence reduced, the process by which Ogbulafor emerged, cannot be considered a triumph in the quest for intra-party democracy. Many, if not most, delegates told us they wanted to cast ballots in an actual election. Yar'Adua's reference to the "level of integrity of political competition and participation which we have attained" should be read with the irony it deserves. END COMMENT.

SANDERS